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Police use force only as necessary

03/15/2004

Don't hit at all if it is honorably possible to avoid hitting; but never hit soft.

- Theodore Roosevelt

This piece is a follow up to the last one where I talked about the media and how it affects people's perception of how violence can physically affect people. Today I thought I would talk about just how difficult it can be to subdue and handcuff someone who is actively resisting arrest.

I really hesitated before I used the above quote from "Teddy." I know that a few people, albeit a very few people, think that all police officers are "violent thugs" who abuse people because they enjoy it.

Almost all police officers would much rather avoid a fight and the use of force than have to use it. I can't say all, but, believe me, the vast majority would just as soon never have to use any force on anyone.

Often however, they don't have a choice.

Iowa code gives police officers the authority to use the force necessary to affect an arrest. Officers are expected to use only the force necessary, not more or less.

Often that is where the problem lies. What force is necessary to make that arrest? That is when the courts have used the term "reasonable." What would a "reasonable person" have done in that situation? Again, different people with different perceptions and different backgrounds can come to different conclusions, and these people are the ones who sit on juries.

I think that one thing that many people don't understand is that when a police officer tells someone they are under arrest, then that person is under arrest, period.

The decision to arrest someone is not one taken lightly, but once made, there is no turning back. The officer can't say, "Oh, wait a minute, are you going to fight me? OK, then I am unarresting you, and you can go on your way."

If we did that, we would soon have chaos. That isn't to say that we can never





pick the time and place of an arrest, particularly with a warrant; but more often than not, we cannot.

One of the complaints I hear again and again is that there were too many officers arresting this person, or there were too many officers at this call or traffic stop. While that may appear to be the case to the casual observer, there is often a reason for the number of officers.

Often officers have a sense that this call or stop may go badly. It might be from the way the person is acting, or the nature of the call, or the officer may even know the subjects from previous contact.

The more officers that are there, the less chance that someone, officer or bad guy, will get hurt. The bad guy may decide not to resist or, if he does, he will simply be put on the ground and overwhelmed by the number of officers affecting the arrest.

The number of officers needed for a safe arrest can also be affected by what the suspect may be on at the time. Is he or she drunk or on drugs? That can make a tremendous difference in the numbers needed for the arrest.

I have seen people on drugs, particularly hallucinogenic drugs, resisting arrest where six or seven officers were needed to subdue the person.

Now I know that some of you are probably thinking, "Don't these officers get training on how to arrest people without hurting them?"

You are right in thinking that. We do get very good defensive tactics training from officers who have been certified by the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy.

However, that training is not a sure-fire way to subdue a person without injury who is actively resisting arrest. Pressure points and joint techniques work best on persons who are passively resisting, someone who simply won't put their hands behind their back - not someone trying to break your jaw with a fist.

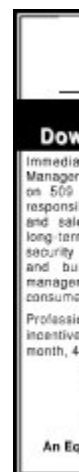
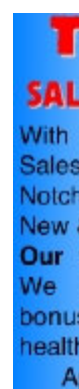
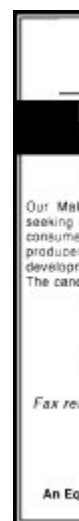
Those skills applied to someone who wants to fight you require hours and hours of practice to be successful, not something we can do with current time and budget restraints.

To subdue a person who is trying to punch or kick you will often require a baton. Officers carry a collapsible baton called an "Asp." It is used to strike large muscle masses, such as in the outer thigh. That will cause the muscle to contract, thus causing incapacitation.

Once again, the success of that can depend on what the suspect may have ingested into his system. Alcohol can often cause a person to "feel no pain," and thus the technique can lose some of its effectiveness.

Often I believe it is difficult for people who have never been involved in a violent confrontation to understand just how difficult it can be to subdue someone.

There are many factors to consider. Not only the ones that I have talked about, but also things such as the athletic ability of the persons involved, the



stamina of the people involved and the fear and adrenaline that kick in during a violent confrontation.

Even with all these things to consider, the vast majority of the time the officers are able to make these arrests with little or no injury to themselves or the suspects. I think that speaks well of their professionalism, their training, and their dedication to their duty.

In going back to my quote from President Roosevelt, I guess my point is that police officers never want to use force if they can avoid it, but if forced into it, they must be successful. They cannot do things half way.


I hope that the next time you read about an alleged case of "police brutality" in the papers, you keep some of these things in mind.

- Keith Mehlin is chief of the Council Bluffs Police Department

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